

Carl Rogers: Freedom to Learn (1969)

Roger's work on learning has been highly influential for many educators interested in more humanistic/progressive approaches to education. Drawn out of the late 60s Rogers explores the theoretical and practical implications for what he describes as *significant, meaningful experiential learning*. This is in contrast to learning from 'the neck up' which is more typical of what happens in schooling models.

Rogers provides a series of accounts of mainstream teachers in addition to outlining a series of observations which are copied below.

My personal perspective is that Rogers describes a highly *relational* account of the learning experience. There are clearly links between his thoughts on learning and the broader humanistic approach to psychotherapy that Rogers developed. Importantly I see a connection between his work and TA concepts, including, for example:

Keith Tudor's work on the neopsyche and integrating Adult
Susannah Temple's Functional Fluency for educators
Sills & Hargaden's work on relational transactional analysis

Whilst Rogers is perhaps more appropriately situated in the humanistic/progressive model (Napper & Newton, 2000) there are also helpful connections with his ideas about the role of facilitator with the role of the educator in radical education models, for example in Mezirow's transformational learning.

Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning

I wish to present some very brief remarks, in the hope that if they bring forth any reaction from you, I may get some new light on my own ideas.

- a) My experience is that I cannot teach another person how to teach. To attempt it is for me, in the long run, futile.
- b) It seems to me that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential and has little or no significant influence on behavior.
- c) I realize increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behavior.
- d) I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influence behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.
- e) Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another.
- f) As a consequence of the above, I realize that I have lost interest in being a teacher.
- g) When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seems a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching appears to succeed. When this happens I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience, and to stifle

significant learning. Hence, I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.

h) When I look back at the results of my past teaching, the real results seem the same - either damage was done - or nothing significant occurred. This is frankly troubling.

i) As a consequence, I realize that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that have some significant influence on my own behavior.

j) I find it very rewarding to learn, in groups, in relationships with one person as in therapy, or by myself.

k) I find that one of the best, but most difficult, ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which his experience seems and feels to the other person.

l) I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my puzzlements, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have.

m) This whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. It seems to mean letting my experiences carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing complexity.

I am almost afraid I may seem to have gotten away from any discussion of learning, as well as teaching. Let me again introduce a practical note by saying that by themselves these interpretations of my experience may sound queer and aberrant, but not particularly shocking. It is when I realize the implications that I shudder a bit at the distance I have come from the commonsense world that everyone knows is right. I can best illustrate this by saying that if the experiences of others had been the same as mine, and if I had discovered similar meanings in it, many consequences would be implied:

a.) Such experience would imply that we would do away with teaching. People would get together if they wished to learn.

b.) We would do away with examinations. They measure the inconsequential type of learning.

c.) We would do away with grades and credits for the same reason.

d.) We would do away with degrees as a measure of competence partly for the same reason. Another reason is that a degree marks an end or a conclusion of something, and a learner is only interested in the continuing process of learning.

e.) We would do away with the exposition of conclusions, for we would realize that no one learns significantly from conclusions.

I think I had better to stop here. I do not want to become too fantastic. I want

to know primarily whether anything in my inward thinking, as I have tried to describe it, speaks to anything in your experience of the classroom as you have lived it, and if so, what the meanings are that exist for you in your experience.

Regarding Learning and Its Facilitation (1969)

How does a person learn? How can important learnings be facilitated? What basic theoretical assumptions are involved?

Here are a number of the principles which can, I believe, be abstracted from current experience and research related to this newer approach:

Learning

- 1) Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.
- 2) Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.
- 3) Learning which involves a change in self organization - in the perception of oneself - is threatening and tends to be resisted.
- 4) Those learning which are threatening to the self are more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum.
- 5) When threats to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed.
- 6) Much significant learning is acquired through doing.
- 7) Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.
- 8) Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most lasting and pervasive.
- 9) Independence, creativity, and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.
- 10) The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change.

Facilitation

- 1) The facilitator has much to do with setting the initial mood or climate of the group or class experience.
- 2) The facilitator helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group.
- 3) He relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes which have meaning for him, as the motivational force behind significant learning.
- 4) He endeavours to organize and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning.
- 5) He regards himself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group.
- 6) In responding to expressions in the classroom group, he accepts both the intellectual content and the emotionalized attitudes, endeavouring to give each aspect the approximate degree of emphasis which it has for the individual or the group.
- 7) As the acceptant classroom climate becomes established, the facilitator is able increasingly to become a participant learner, a member of the group, expressing his views as those of one individual only.
- 8) He takes the initiative in sharing himself with the group - his feelings as well as his thoughts - in ways which do not demand nor impose but represent simply a personal sharing which students may take or leave.
- 9) Throughout the classroom experience, he remains alert to the expression indicative of deep or strong feelings.
- 10) In his functioning as a facilitator of learning, the leader endeavours to recognize and accept his own limitations.